
Contesting the Master-Narratives of Thai Historiography:

A Bibliographic Essay

JORDAN D. JOHNSON

Arizona State University

Accounts of modern Thai history have traditionally often been influenced by two highly influential normative viewpoints, which are that the Thai monarchy (especially since the mid-nineteenth century) has been singularly responsible for guiding the course of Thailand's successful transformation into a modern nation-state, and that Thai Buddhism is something that can be wholly separated from socio-political life and any departure from this model represents a novel corruption. This essay serves as a critical examination of these two pervasive narratives within Thai historiography, with a particular emphasis on exploring the underlying discursive trends that led to the rise of these two dominant paradigms. Furthermore, the following discussion highlights attempts by a more recent generation of scholars to offer a critical re-assessment of these "master-narratives," thereby challenging the conclusions to which they lead.

It is sometimes said within the field of philosophy of science that *all data is theory-laden*. If this is true – and there is a powerful argument to be made that it is – then the implication of this axiom for historiography is that there is probably no way of presenting historical information that is in all ways neutral and free from the influence of certain dominant discursive pressures. This is certainly true in the case of histories of Thailand. In the "Prologue" to his book, *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts*, for example, Craig Reynolds asserts that, "in the Thai public square there is no such thing as disinterested history."¹ Within Thai historiography certain themes or "master-narratives" have traditionally served as organizing principles that dictate the manner in which information is presented in order to either implicitly or explicitly advance certain agendas. In this essay, several relatively recent monographs concerning Thai history, religion, society, and politics will be examined with an eye towards looking at how themes prominent within Thai studies are being re-assessed by scholars who have an interest in looking beyond history as it is *supposed to have been*, and finding new interpretive lenses with which to illuminate new and understudied aspects of the historical record. In particular, this discussion will focus on two "ideal forms" within Thai historiog-

raphy. The first is the notion that the operative agent in the formation of the modern Thai nation was the benevolent, Herculean, and enlightened leadership of Thai kings. The second is the idea of normative Thai Buddhism being a religious tradition unsullied by contact with the mundane world of politics. With respect to these two themes, it will be shown that although powerful forces exist within both of these areas that encourage specific kinds of histories to be written and certain interpretative angles to be employed, important work is being done to challenge the validity of some of the traditional master-narratives of Thai history and open up new avenues of interpretive hermeneutics from which there is much to be gained.

The Centrality of the Monarchy in the Emergence of the Modern Thai Nation

One of the most obvious factors that sets the nation of Thailand apart from all other nations in Southeast Asia is the fact that it was never formally colonized by a European power, and thus the process of modernization in Thailand was not driven by a series of colonial viceroys ruling on behalf of a foreign government. Rather, the process was driven by forces from within.

Within traditional Thai histories, although a number of different factors are presented as converging to allow the modernization process to take place, it is very clearly the Thai monarchy that is given primary credit for masterminding a plan for the “native” modernization of Thailand and then carrying it to fruition. In particular, kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn are singled out for the reform programs that they initiated, which not only allowed Thailand to begin to develop a semi-modern infrastructure and enter successfully into the international market economy, but also succeed in helping to navigate the Thai nation between the Scylla of French colonialist ambitions on the one side and the Charybdis of British imperial designs on the other. In *Thailand: A Short History*, David Wyatt describes the Kingdom of Siam’s situation in the mid-nineteenth century in these terms:

The kingdom thus confronted three issues: internal integration, external territorial losses, and the survival of an independent Siam. The outcome was a product of political developments centering around the Bangkok court. Everything depended on the two men who were kings of Siam during the years from 1851 to 1910, Mongkut and his son Chulalongkorn. It was on their shoulders that the burdens fell; it was they who had to make the difficult decisions.²

Broadly speaking, this type of description is fairly typical within traditional Thai historiography. Such narratives not only give a great deal of agency to Mongkut and (particularly) Chulalongkorn in actualizing the transformation that Siam underwent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also tend to present the Thai monarchs as being something akin to political geniuses whose singular prescience and wisdom allowed them to succeed against seemingly impossible odds where all other Southeast Asian monarchs had failed.

There is much about this particular interpretation of Thailand’s development into a modern nation-state that might benefit from further scrutiny, as it would seem to be influenced by the employment of a pro-monarchy interpretive lens that seeks to valorize the role of the Chakri dynasty in achieving the successes that Thailand attained. Before beginning to deconstruct this narrative, however, it is important to note that although it is crucial to recognize and rethink the influence of the royalist “master-narrative” on the writing of Thai history, it is equally important not to

“throw the baby out with the bath water.” Quite simply, any history of the development of modern Thailand that fails to include an account of the critical role that the monarchy played – or fails to note the remarkable achievements and influence of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn – would be patently absurd.

However, there may be a sense that accounts of Thai history painting modern members of the Chakri dynasty as being driven in all of their actions only by benevolence and selfless concern for the Thai nation may need to be amended in light of new evidence. Maurizio Peleggi argues that up until the last few decades, Western historians (he specifically mentions Wyatt) have been the unwitting heirs to a royalist historical narrative constructed by Prince Damrong, which lionizes the Thai monarchy’s enlightened leadership in bringing about what is characterized as a unique case of indigenous modernization and nation-building.³ Peleggi represents one among a new generation of scholars who question elements of this dominant master-narrative by looking at the evidence available using new interpretive lenses.

In *Lords of Things*, Peleggi draws attention to the fact that although figures like Mongkut and Chulalongkorn were certainly driven in part by the need to answer the myriad challenges presented by the Thai nation-state’s entry into the world of international politics and economics in the late nineteenth century, this cannot be seen as the *only* motivation at play. In a compelling and rather convincing analysis, Peleggi argues that one factor key to understanding the behavior of the Thai royal family in this period is a shift in their own *self-image*. The essential argument runs along the lines that after gaining some degree of exposure to the royal families of Europe, members of the Thai royal family began to undergo a fundamental shift in identity. The consequence of this shift in identity was that they began to see themselves as members of a larger class of world monarchs (Peleggi uses the evocative phrase “Victorian ecumene”) who were perhaps marked off from one another by differences of *degree* (for instance, differences in the amount of wealth and power enjoyed by each royal house), but were not fundamentally different from one another in *kind*. The most readily apparent result of this identity transformation involved *conspicuous consumption* – the Thai royal family noted the fact that royal dynasties in Europe

used public displays of opulent wealth as identity markers, and thus followed suit.

Peleggi notes that Chulalongkorn's visits to Europe, for example, while often portrayed as diplomatic expeditions wherein the king engaged in cagey political maneuvers designed to guarantee Siam's continued sovereignty, might also be portrayed as *shopping sprees*, wherein Chulalongkorn hoped to mimic the zest for material acquisition displayed by European royals, and hence join their ranks. Peleggi further notes that the royal family sought to project this new outward identity by commissioning photographs of itself wherein the Thai royals were depicted as a thoroughly "modern" family of individuals who were as much at home dressed in slightly altered suits of Western clothing as they were striking noble, vaguely Napoleonic poses for the camera. Peleggi's overall analysis takes nothing away from the fact that the royal family was crucial in the stewardship of Siam through a critical time in its history, but he does succeed in challenging the notion that the national interests of the nation-state were the only motivational factors at work in their actions, as certain elements of self-interest were certainly at play as well.

Other recent challenges to the dominant royalist paradigm of Thai historiography have come from different directions. Within this new, revisionist mode of historical analysis, a broad agreement seems to exist that the singular centrality of the Thai royal family in shaping the contours of what would become modern Thailand must be mitigated somewhat. Thongchai Winichakul's seminal work, *Siam Mapped*, for instance, demonstrates the degree to which the power of modern map-making and shifting ideas about the nature of political space aided in the development of modern Thailand into the "geo-body" that it is today.⁴ Although Thongchai's work is certainly not an abject refutation of the notion that the royal family was pivotal in the construction of the Thai nation-state, he nevertheless does succeed in de-centering the central importance of the monarchy somewhat by demonstrating the discursive power that borders and margins (as indicated on maps) had in the development of Thai nationhood.

Along broadly similar lines, Tamara Loos' *Subject Siam* presents two major challenges to the aforementioned royalist master-narrative of Thai history.⁵ First,

much as Thongchai focused on the conceptual influence of maps, Loos turns her attention toward the discursive power of laws in the formation of modern Thailand, and asserts that an analysis of the influence of the evolution of the Thai legal code presents a further challenge to the idea that the Thai monarchy somehow single-handedly dragged Siam into the modern world through the power of crafty political action and beneficent charisma alone. In essence, Loos argues that changes in the Thai legal tradition pertaining to family law had a pivotal role to play in the construction of what she describes as a distinctly Thai "alternative modernity."

More specifically, her second critique of the royalist master-narrative is that although Thai nationalists often take great pride in the fact that Siam/Thailand was never colonized by a European power, it would not be a true statement to assert that Thailand escaped the influence of European colonialism altogether. On the contrary, by focusing on the phenomenon of "plural" legal systems within a given political space, Loos demonstrates that – in truth – Siam was both the victim and the perpetrator of hegemonic imperialism. She argues that the success of numerous colonial powers in forcing Siam to accept certain extraterritoriality provisions (wherein citizens of various "powerful" nations were not subject to Thai laws) must be understood as something akin to a type of colonialism, albeit a variety wherein benefits accrue to a dozen different colonial powers rather than just one. Moreover, it is argued that these extraterritoriality claims were rhetorically predicated on the notion that Thai laws were barbaric and irrational, which, in turn, led to a drive to reform the Thai legal code in such a way that European powers would no longer feel uncomfortable allowing their citizens to be judged according to the dictates of Thai law.

As a further move toward establishing some level of equality with European colonial powers, Loos argues that Siam itself engaged in a program of imperialistic expansionism in the Patani region of what is now southern Thailand. This was accomplished by bringing local leaders into Bangkok's sphere of influence through the threat of violent force, and subsequently subjecting the Muslim-Malay population to a "plural" legal system vaguely reminiscent of the one which European powers imposed on Thailand. Along similar lines with Peleggi's argument that the Thai monarchy

embarked on a program of extravagant *spending because that is what the “modern” (read: European) monarchs* – whose ranks they wished to join – *did*, Loos contends that Siam engaged in a variety of imperialistic expansionism *because that’s the kind of thing that “modern” nations* – a group that Siam sought to join – *engaged in*. Although one could perhaps make an argument that Loos may overemphasize the influence of legal discourse when making her larger points about Siam’s colonial status (that is, as colonized and colonizer), her book stands as an important addition to the growing corpus of critical studies of Thai history that challenge certain aspects of the prevailing royalist narrative.

Setting aside the self-consciously critical re-assessment of the royalist master-narrative of Thai history for a moment, there has also been some important work done on how the contemporary notion of Thai national identity (or “Thai-ness”) emerged in the context of Thailand’s development into a modern nation-state, and how this concept of “Thai-ness” has been deployed by different groups in the service of advancing certain agendas. As Charles Keyes notes:

Since the reign of King Chulalongkorn...there has been a conscious effort on the part of the central government in Bangkok to bring all the diverse peoples living within the political boundaries of Thailand under its authority. The assertion of this authority has been exercised not primarily through the use of force.... Rather, it has been asserted by emphasizing a set of national symbols that hold a strong appeal for the vast majority of the populace. At the center of this lies the monarch (*phra maha kasat*), upon whom the legitimate power of the state is based.⁶

What Keyes points to here is the fact that even aside from any specific actions that the king takes, the office of the monarch itself is vested with a certain symbolism that has been used (along with Buddhism) in the integration of Thailand into a modern nation-state. There is thus an important sense in which the “imagined community” (to use Benedict Anderson’s term) of Thailand has traditionally been oriented around the axial center of a conception of “Thai-ness” that prominently features the king at its core. This notion of “Thai-ness” has, in turn, been employed by elites in the discursive construction of the modern nation of Thailand.

Walter Vella’s *Chaiyo!: King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* is an interesting analysis of just this phenomenon.⁷ Vella’s account of the reign of King Vajiravudh cannot be characterized as containing as radical (or, to borrow Craig Reynolds’ term, as “seditious”) a re-interpretation of the historical record as can be found in the aforementioned books by Peleggi, Thongchai, and Loos. In part, this is because rather than dealing with the legendary figures of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, the subject of Vella’s book – Vajiravudh – is a man not always remembered in the fondest terms within traditional Thai historiography, so the stakes involved in portraying him as a human being acting out of eminently human motives are not quite so high. Nevertheless, Vella’s analysis is interesting insofar as it portrays King Vajiravudh as a cunning pragmatist who recognized what he saw as the need for the development of a national *esprit* to unify the Thai nation, and then set about consciously constructing a nationalistic discourse that linked the three “pillars” of religion, nation, and monarchy together as the center of an essential “Thai-ness.”

Vella argues that more than simply being a political leader and cultural icon, King Vajiravudh also functioned as a kind of “propagandist-in-chief” who sought to establish an emotional connection between the populace living within his kingdom and this feeling of “Thai-ness.” Furthermore, Vajiravudh subsequently lionized militarism in defense of this “Thai-ness” as an inherent and commendable cultural value of the Thai people.⁸ A cynic might point out that it would be hard not to suspect an explicitly self-interested motive for Vajiravudh’s rhetorical elevation of Thai kingship to the very center of Thai national identity, given that he was the first Thai monarch of the modern era to have the legitimacy of his absolute rule seriously questioned (i.e. the failed coup of 1912), and thus had a personal stake in reinforcing the prestige of the office that he held.⁹ On the whole, although the overall image of Vajiravudh that Vella presents does not represent a direct challenge to the historiographical master-narrative of enlightened Thai kingship, the picture that he presents of a talented yet plotting and reclusive human being attempting to willfully manipulate the Thai national character in order to meet certain nationalistic ends does not fit neatly within this royalist master-narrative either.

Finally, despite the success that figures like Vajiravudh achieved in constructing, deploying, and popularizing a Thai national identity to be used in the service of creating the imaged community of Thailand, some recent scholarship has called attention to apparent *failures* of the discourse of “Thai-ness” to function as a source of unity throughout the Thai nation. In *Tearing Apart the Land*, for instance, Duncan McCargo argues that one of the central problems involved in the recent rise of violence in the Malay Muslim-dominated southern region of Thailand is that sufficient effort was never expended to include the residents of southern Thailand within a communal Thai national identity.¹⁰ McCargo argues that:

Thai virtuous [monarchical] rule was predicated on the shibboleth “Nation, Religion, King,” but Malay Muslims understood all three of these elements differently from Thai Buddhists. Mutuality between King and people did not work properly in the deep South. For this reason, virtuous rule did not provide a sustainable basis for the legitimacy of the Thai state in the Southern border region.¹¹

As a consequence of this failure to construct a common national identity equally accommodating to ethnically Thai Buddhists and ethnically Malay Muslims, the legitimacy of the king (and, by extension, the rest of the Thai state bureaucracy) to rule over the land was never properly established in Patani, leading the region’s Malay Muslim residents to resent what they see as political domination by an outside entity based in Bangkok. In fact, pressure exists within the Thai national discourse *not* to portray the ongoing violence in the south as evidence of an identity conflict over the failure of “Thai-ness” to be inclusive of all of the nation’s residents. This is because – among other reasons – such a portrayal might constitute an implicit acknowledgement of the failure of the original progenitors of this notion of “Thai-ness” – the royal family – to articulate a sufficiently broad and inclusive conception of Thai national identity. There is thus a sense in which this unwillingness to see the trouble in Patani as a conflict over identity and political legitimacy can be viewed as a form of resistance to interpretations of Thai history and politics that are less than fully supportive of an interpretive hermeneutic that aggrandizes the universal, enlightened – indeed almost infallible – leadership of the Thai monarch.

The Role of Buddhism in Thai Socio-Political Life

Another prominent theme within the field of Thai studies involves controversy over the political role (or supposed lack thereof) of the Buddhist *sangha* within contemporary Thai society. Here again, one is confronted with certain dominant paradigms of thought concerning what Buddhism’s role in society *ought* to be, which must then be reconciled with the reality of facts on-the-ground. For instance, within Western scholarship, a great deal of influence has been exerted by Max Weber’s contention that in its purest, “ancient” form, Buddhism is a “specifically unpolitical and anti-political status religion, or more precisely, a religious ‘technology’ of wandering and of intellectually-schooled mendicant monks.”¹² One of the consequences of Weber’s influential formulation of normative Buddhism has been that cases of the Thai Buddhist *sangha* exerting political influence within Thailand have often been portrayed as marked departures from the original function that *true* Buddhism played within society, which was to provide a method of retreat from the realm of the here-and-now, and offer a means of moving toward the “other-worldly” ideal of *nibbana*. Therefore, without much effort being put into investigating the possibility that Buddhism in Thailand (as well as everywhere else) has always had a political dimension, a trend in scholarship emerged which emphasizes the *novelty* of the close association of the Buddhist *sangha* with the politics of the state. Moreover, even for a later generation of scholars who saw no inherent contradiction in the marriage of Buddhism and politics in the Thai context, an assumption has often persevered that only certain *kinds* of political involvement are appropriate for members of the *sangha*, and that anything that falls outside of these parameters must be viewed as an aberration.

As one example of the influence of the Weberian construction of Buddhism in the field of Thai studies, Yoneo Ishii’s *Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History* takes Weber’s construction of what Buddhism essentially *is* to be a given.¹³ He argues that at its heart, Buddhism is a rationalistic tradition of renunciation geared toward elites and consisting of textually-derived doctrines. Moreover, he argues that this genuine Buddhism – which he calls “nibbanic Buddhism” – is little practiced in contemporary Thailand,

noting that “the orthodox doctrines of Buddhism, those oriented to the otherworldly realm, hold little interest for the majority of Thais.”¹⁴ What one is more likely to encounter in contemporary Thailand, Ishii argues, are forms of the tradition that he describes as “kammatic Buddhism” (which centers on the generation of positive merit in order to improve one’s material conditions in future lives), “apotropaic Buddhism” (which is concerned with warding off evil through the performance of magical rites), and a “secular” subsystem of Buddhism (wherein members of the *sangha* involve themselves in the education and moral development of the laity). The implicit argument here is that any form of Buddhism that explicitly entails the involvement of the *sangha* in the socio-political world of lay people represents a departure from normative, doctrinal Buddhism. Although Ishii’s contentions here are hardly uncommon for their time (Melford Spiro made very similar claims with regard to Burmese Buddhism, for instance), later generations of scholars would come to argue that although a neat cleavage between “this-worldly” Buddhism and “other-worldly” Buddhism may exist as a theoretical construct, in reality there was probably *never* a time in which this distinction was strictly maintained. Rather, it is probably the case that Buddhism has *always* had a significant role to play in the social and political life of individuals, which renders the idea of “doctrinal” or “nibbanic” Buddhism being the one “true Buddhism” profoundly unhelpful.

However, having said this, Ishii notes that regardless of whether or not the involvement of Buddhism in the socio-political sphere represents a novel departure from tradition, the fact that Buddhism has a significant role to play in modern Thai politics is self-evident. He notes that the history of twentieth century Thailand can be viewed as the history of the gradually growing alliance between the Thai state and the Buddhist *sangha*. Ishii argues that the Sangha Act of 1902 marks the beginning of what he calls “state Buddhism,” wherein the secular government of Thailand gained control over the structure and function of the Thai *sangha*, and began to use it as a tool to be deployed in the service of integrating the territories under the control of the Bangkok government into a single, modern nation.¹⁵ Specifically, Ishii notes how the reforms instituted by the first Sangha Act marked the beginning of a period during which the Thai *sangha* was integrated into a

monolithic entity, and a Thai Theravada “orthodoxy” was established by virtue of the fact that standardized tests (with definitively “correct” and “incorrect” answers) were formulated for entrance into the higher ranks of the *sangha*. In this way, Ishii paints a picture of what he characterizes as a transition from plural Thai *Buddhisms* to a singular Thai *Buddhism*.¹⁶

In many ways, Peter Jackson’s *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict* represents a continuation of Ishii’s essential line of argumentation, except that he adds to Ishii’s analysis of the *construction* of “state Buddhism” (or what Jackson refers to as “establishment Buddhism”) by further delving into an analysis of what he sees as the *deconstruction* of this unitary, state-aligned Buddhism by certain reformist agents.¹⁷ In effect, he argues that the stranglehold on official orthodoxy that the Thai Buddhist “establishment” once held has been fractured in recent years (especially since the 1970’s) by the emergence of trends toward reform and factionalism. Whereas in the first part of the twentieth century, the Thai Buddhist “establishment” was the only religious institution capable of being seen as “legitimate” by the Thai populace, Jackson argues that this monopoly on legitimacy has been fractured in recent years by movements such as Santi Asok and Dhammakaya that challenge the singular authority of the establishment *sangha* and seek to find new ways to make Buddhism relevant to modern life and compatible with Thai middle-class values.

Jackson’s analysis also represents an important departure from the aforementioned Weberian construction of an idealized, other-worldly Buddhism, insofar as he takes it to be a given that Buddhism and politics are inherently related to one another. He notes, for instance, that although it is traditional within academia for a wall of separation to exist between the academic fields of religious studies and political science,

...the retention of this theoretical distinction when studying Thai political and religious life, in which notions of sacred and temporal power cannot be categorically distinguished, can lead to a failure to appreciate the significance of the real and continuing relationship between Theravada Buddhism and political activity in Thailand.¹⁸

Significantly, Jackson does not present this connection between Buddhism and politics as some sort of an aberrant departure from the normative tradition.

Rather, he argues that Buddhism has an inherently political role to play in Thailand, and to ignore this fact would inevitably lead to an impoverished understanding of both Thai Buddhism and Thai political life.

In *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*, Somboon Suksamran makes arguments very similar to Jackson's insofar as he draws attention to the close relationship between the *sangha* and the politics of the Thai state.¹⁹ However, Somboon identifies another source for the widespread misperception that Buddhism and politics do not mix (that is, aside from the aforementioned theoretical distinction between "this-worldly" affairs and "other-worldly" affairs that has been influential within the academy), which is, namely, the Thai *sangha* itself. Somboon asserts that because politics is seen as a "dirty business" in Thailand, the *sangha* has a vested interest in being perceived as holding itself "above the fray" of politics in order to preserve its own sense of legitimacy, and thus takes great pains to conceal the degree to which it is deeply involved in the political world of the here-and-now. Moreover, Somboon contends that the Thai state itself colludes with the *sangha* in the encouragement of this misperception that religion and politics do not mix in Thailand, because the reciprocal relationship between the *sangha* and state in Thailand is such that any perceived threat to the legitimacy of the *sangha* stemming from the revelation of its involvement in mundane, political affairs would have a deleterious effect on the legitimacy of the state as well.

Thus, a close examination of the literature on the political role of the Buddhist *sangha* within the Thai state reveals an interesting point of congruence wherein *both* the Weberian-influenced notion of normative Buddhism as being "other-worldly" in its ideal form, *and* a self-interested motive on the part of the *sangha* to conceal its involvement in political affairs so as not to tarnish its own image, have *together* produced a dominant master-narrative wherein Buddhism in Thailand is (wrongly) portrayed as being inherently apolitical, with exceptions to this rule being depicted as departures from the norm. This phenomenon can be seen as an example of what Charles Hallisey has called a productive "elective affinity" that exists "between the positive historiography of European Orientalism and some Buddhist styles of self-representation which shaped the manner in which research in Buddhist studies became organized...."²⁰ There is thus a sense in which the work of scholars like Jackson and Somboon

– both of whom highlight the inherently political aspect of Thai Buddhism in great detail – can be seen as a necessary and important corrective to misapprehensions concerning the actual relationship between Buddhism and politics in Thailand.

Finally, another master-narrative – alluded to above – concerning the Thai *sangha* that probably deserves more scrutiny than it has heretofore received is the notion that up until the late nineteenth century, it would be more appropriate to speak of multiple Thai *Buddhisms* than a single *Buddhism* existing within Siam. In the wake of the reforms of the Sangha Act of 1902, the Thai *sangha* became integrated into a monolithic entity that has only begun to experience fractionalization in relatively recent times. Justin McDaniel's *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words* represents a challenge to this dominant paradigm.²¹ He argues that if one shifts attention away from the macrocosmic level of looking at the laws that were being written in Bangkok, and instead actually examines the microcosmic effect that these laws were having "on-the-ground" in monasteries around the country, it becomes clear that the nation-wide "integration" of the *sangha* into a unified entity marked by a single orthodoxy has been greatly exaggerated. By examining the textbooks used for monastic education in northern Thailand in the early twentieth century, McDaniel is able to show that most individual temples were little affected by the monastic reforms of 1902, and continued to retain their own idiosyncratic (one could even say "heterodox") systems of monastic education that did not fall in line with the new orthodoxy being promoted by the *sangha* establishment. McDaniel's analysis demonstrates that although the official, "institutional history" of the Thai *sangha* has the distinct advantage of producing an analytically "neat" model of the creation of a universally-accepted Thai Buddhist orthodoxy, there is a degree to which this portrayal represents an outright fiction. If McDaniel is correct – and his arguments are, indeed, quite persuasive – then the dominant model of a significant disjuncture between a "fractured" *sangha* pre-1902 and a "united" *sangha* post-1902 needs to be seriously re-examined in light of the fact that the Thai *sangha* was probably never as unified as the "institutional history" of the *sangha* has led us to believe.

Conclusion

As the Marxist-influenced analysis of Craig Reynolds reminds us, when examining the historiographical record, we must not only pay attention to *what* is being said in the histories that have been written about Thailand, but must also examine *why* it is being said. Certain socio-political entities (such as the Thai monarchy and the Thai Buddhist *sangha*) have a vested interest in history being written in certain ways. Perspectives that countervail the dominant paradigm are thus apt to encounter some degree of deep structural resistance. In this way, certain dominant paradigms of thought – which have here been described as “master-narratives” – become entrenched. Having said this, however, it is important to stress that although this essay has taken as its topic a critical re-assessment of some of the dominant master-narratives operative within traditional Thai historiography, it would be naïve to suggest that the new generation of scholars examined in this discussion are immune to the influence of certain dominant paradigms themselves. As stated at the outset of this essay, it is probably the case that when it comes to history, society, and politics in Thailand (or any country), utterly neutral presentations of facts devoid of underlying ideological agendas are a theoretical impossibility. Moreover, it might be argued that although one must be careful not to uncritically accept the truth of works of historical or political analysis written under the influence of various master-narratives, this does not mean that there is little to be learned from looking at the master-narratives themselves. On the contrary, by examining, for instance, the image that Thai royalists wish to present of the monarchy’s role in the formation of the modern Thai nation, or the style of self-representation that the Thai *sangha* endeavors to communicate to the outside world, there is an important sense in which one places oneself in a position to understand and assess the underlying logic of the agendas which motivate these idiosyncratic presentations of history, and hence to better appreciate the cultural values operative in contemporary Thailand.

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EndNotes

- ¹ Craig J. Reynolds. *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), viii.
- ² David K. Wyatt. *Thailand: A Short History*. Second Edition. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 166.
- ³ Maurizio Peleggi. *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 5-7.
- ⁴ Thongchai Winichakul. *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).
- ⁵ Tamara Loos. *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- ⁶ Charles F. Keyes. *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 3.
- ⁷ Walter F. Vella. *Chaiyo!: King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1978).
- ⁸ As an aside, Craig Reynolds observes that a politically expedient linkage between the promotion of a certain brand of Thai national identity and a militaristic ethos did not end with the death of Vajiravudh. He notes that during the numerous times that military strongmen seized the reins of political power in Thailand, "the Thai military was assiduous, aggressive even, in promoting Thai national culture and national identity in an effort to enshroud itself with the trappings of authenticity and legitimacy. The genius of the military and the state security organizations lay in having nurtured a mentality in the bureaucracy and social institutions that embraces the very values the military cherishes." Reynolds, *Seditious Histories*, 272.
- ⁹ Vella does, however, note that although his true internal motivations cannot be known, Vajiravudh's own writings suggest that he was driven less by self-interest than he was motivated by a Hobbesian view of human nature wherein human beings require the firm hand of a strong ruler to keep them from spiraling into chaos. Vella, *Chaiyo!*, 60-61.
- ¹⁰ Duncan McCargo. *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).
- ¹¹ McCargo, *Tearing Apart*, 16.
- ¹² Max Weber. *The Religion of India*, ed. and trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1958), p. 206.
- ¹³ Yoneo Ishii. *Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History*, trans. Peter Hawkes. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986).
- ¹⁴ Ishii, *Sangha*, 14.
- ¹⁵ This elevation of Buddhism as the Thai "national religion" and the promotion of the idea that "to be Thai is to be Buddhist" is another element of the discursive construction of "Thai-ness" discussed earlier.
- ¹⁶ As will be noted below, this is a characterization that a newer generation of scholars – such as Justin McDaniel – eventually call into question.
- ¹⁷ Peter A. Jackson. *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism*. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989).
- ¹⁸ Jackson. *Buddhism*, 4-5.
- ¹⁹ Somboon Suksamran. *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand: A Study of Socio-Political Change and Political Activism of the Thai Sangha*. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).
- ²⁰ Charles Hallisey. "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism." In *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 49.
- ²¹ Justin McDaniel. *Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).